

## The Eightfold Path in Aśvaghoṣa's *Saundarananda*

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[Abstract]

In the latter half of the *Saundarananda*, more precisely from Cantos XII to XVII, Aśvaghoṣa skillfully depicts the Buddha's detailed expounds on yoga and Nanda's actual practice in the beautiful form of *Kāvya*. This part, therefore, has been considered as one of the most useful sources for understanding the school affiliation of Aśvaghoṣa, which seems to have been an issue of ongoing controversy up until now. The purpose of this paper, however, is not about affirming any of the previous assertions, but rather about casting doubts on its textual reliability regarding its doctrinal elements, which naturally leads to skepticism on the long-standing controversy of Aśvaghoṣa's sectarian identity itself.

**Key words** Aśvaghoṣa, *Saundarananda*, Eightfold Path, Three Classes of the path, Sectarian identity

### I. Aśvaghoṣa's Eightfold Path in the *Saundarananda* : on Canto XVI verses 30-33

In middle of Canto XVI of the *Saundarananda* (SN), Buddha expounds to Nanda the Eightfold Path as the last constituents of Four Noble Truth :

*asyābhyupāyo 'dhigamāya mārگاḥ prajñātrikalpaḥ praśamadvikalpaḥ /*  
*sa bhāvanīyo vidhivad budhena śīle śucau tripramukhe sthitena // 16.30 //*

The method to attain this [cessation of defilements] is the path which consists of threefold Insight (*prajñā*) and twofold Quiescence (*praśama*). It should be practiced appropriately by the wise who abides in the threefold pure Discipline (*śīla*).

*vākkarma samyak sahakāyakarma yathāvad ājīvanayaś ca śuddhaḥ /*  
*idaṃ trayam vṛttavidhau pravṛttaṃ śīlāśrayaṃ karmaṇiparigrahāya // 16.31 //*

Correct Verbal and Bodily Behavior (*vāk/kāyakarman*), and pure, proper Livelihood (*ājīvanaya*); these three, which are based on Discipline (*śīla*), arise in the rules of action in order to control one's behavior.

*satyeṣu duḥkhādiṣu dṛṣṭir āryā samyag vitarkaś ca parākramaś ca /*  
*idaṃ trayam jñānavidhau pravṛttaṃ prajñāśrayaṃ kleśaparikṣayāya // 16.32 //*

Noble View (*dṛṣṭi*) on the [four] truths, such as suffering, Correct Reflection (*vitarka*), and Efforts; these three, which are based on Insight (*prajñā*), arise in the rules of wisdom in order to cease defilements.

*nyāyena satyādhigamāya yuktā samyak smṛtiḥ samyag atho samādhiḥ /*  
*idaṃ dvayaṃ yogavidhau pravṛttaṃ śamāśrayaṃ cittaparigrahāya // 16.33 //*

Correct Recollection (*smṛti*) connected with proper methods to attain the [four] truths, and Correct [Meditative] Absorption (*samādhi*); these two, which are based on Quiescence (*śama*), arise in the rules of yoga in order to control minds.

The most unique feature of this style of description is that the Eightfold Path and the Three Classes of the path, i.e., *śīla-prajñā-samādhi*, are interconnected. But in most cases, as far as my limited scope of research indicates, these two systems are described separately<sup>(1)</sup>. Table 1 illustrates the classification of the Eightfold Path elements on these verses.

Table 1 Three Class-Eightfold Path model in Johnston's edition of the *Saundarananda*

<i>śīla</i> (16.31)	<i>samyag vākkarman</i>
	<i>samyak sahakāyakarman</i>
	<i>samyag ājīva-naya</i>
<i>prajñā</i> (16.32)	<i>samyag dṛṣṭi</i>
	<i>samyag vitarka</i>
	<i>samyak parākrama</i>
<i>śama</i> (= <i>samādhi</i> )(16.33)	<i>samyak smṛti</i>
	<i>samyak samādhi</i>

On this table, unnatural sequence of three classes is noticeable, i.e., *śīla-prajñā-samādhi* which are normally expected to appear in the order of *śīla-samādhi-prajñā*.

Johnston seems to have also paid special attention to these verses and left a long, intuitive note in his standard translations of the text<sup>(2)</sup>. First of all, one of the reasons why I call his simple note “intuitive” is that his suspicion on transposition of verses 32 and 33 has been proven to be correct by a relatively recent identification of Central Asian manuscript fragments by Jens-Uwe Hartmann in 1988<sup>(3)</sup>.

Above all, I would like to briefly mention the conditions of two Nepali manuscripts of the *Saundarananda* with which Johnston produced his standard edition and translations<sup>(4)</sup>. First one is palm leaf manuscript transcribed around 12th century, complete but with many lacunae; the second one is paper manuscript transcribed only in 18th century, also complete and intact but textually much inferior to the first one, and assumed to have derived more or less directly from it. Thus, these are not considered as completely separate versions of the same text. In other words, our current standard text is edited from not much more than a single defective manuscript with many uncertain and probably corrupt passages. This is one of the reasons why there has been so much contention among scholars suggesting different readings of the text.

However, Central Asian fragments, originally published by Heinrich Lüders in 1971 but identified only in 1988, are assumed to have been written around 2nd-3rd century, and it covers Canto XVI verses 21c-33a. Richard Salomon notices the numerous divergences of these fragments and proves them to be “clearly superior” by means of thorough textual analysis<sup>(5)</sup>, which I would not need to specify here. Therefore, these Central Asian fragments are confirmed to be a part of the older and more original text of the *Saundarananda*. Fortunately, this superior fragments include the part describing the Eightfold Path and Three Classes. Table 2 displays the differences between two different editions.

	Hartmann's edition of Central Asian Fragments of <i>SN</i>	Johnston's edition of Nepali Manuscripts of <i>SN</i>
XVI. 30	<i>asyābhyupāyo 'dhiga(māya mārgaḥ prajñādvikalpaḥ) [p](ra)śamatrikalpaḥ tau bhāvanīyau vidhivad budh[e]na ś[ī]le śucau trppramukhe sthiteṇa</i>	<i>asyābhyupāyo 'dhigamāya mārgaḥ prajñātrikalpaḥ praśamad<sup>dv</sup>ikalpaḥ / sa bhāvanāyo vidhivad budhena śīle śucau tripramukhe sthiteṇa //</i>

XVI. 31	[v](ākkarma samyak saha)[kāya]karma yathāvad ājīvanayaś ca śuddhaḥ idaṃ traya[m] (vṛttavidhau pravṛttaṃ śīlāśrayaṃ ka)r[ma]parigra[hā](ya)	vākkarma samyak saha kāyākarma yathāvad ājīvanayaś ca śuddhaḥ / idaṃ trayaṃ vṛttavidhau pravṛttaṃ śīlāśrayaṃ karma parigrahāya //
XVI. 32	[nyā]yena satyādhiga(māya yuktā smṛtiḥ samādhiś <b>ca parākrama(ś ca</b> <b>idaṃ trayam)</b> yogavi[dhau pra]v[r]ttaṃ samāś[r]ayaṃ ci[tta]parig[r]a[h]āya	satyeṣu duḥkhādiṣu dṛṣṭir āryā samyag vitarkaś ca parākramaś ca / idaṃ <b>trayaṃ</b> jñānavidhau pravṛttaṃ prajñāśrayaṃ kleśaparikṣayāya //
XVI. 33	sa)tyeṣ(u) ...	nyāyena satyādhigamāya yuktā <b>samyak</b> smṛtiḥ <b>samyag atho</b> samādhiḥ / idaṃ <b>dvayaṃ</b> yogavidhau pravṛttaṃ śamāśrayaṃ cittaparigrahāya //

Table 2 Comparison of Hartmann's and Johnston's editions on XVI 30-33 of the *Saundarananda*

First of all, I would like to pay attention to verses 32 & 33. Although Central Asian fragments ends with the first single word of verse 33, it is enough to confirm that the original order of verses 32 and 33 has been reversed in Nepali manuscript. However, if you take a look more closely, the divergences seem to bear a more complex process of transition of the text. First of all, not only the order of verse 32 & 33 which implies the dislocation of *prajñā* and *samādhi* classes, but also the position of *samyak parākrama* (Right Efforts) has changed from *samādhi* class to *prajñā* class, or rather left in its original position. Plus, the numbers of constituents of *samādhi* and *prajñā* classes have been carefully re-edited accordingly as you can see in these highlighted parts on verses 32, 33 and 30.

Salomon agrees with Hartmann that the problem is based on a mixing up of verses 31-33. At least in the first stage of transition a simple scribal error or miscopying may have occurred considering the similar endings on these three verses, each of these verses ends with *-parigrahāya* / *-parigrahāya* / *-parikṣayāya*. Next, Salomon also reasonably assumes that the rest of the changes indicate the additional and intentional recension of the text at some later period. Salomon's discussion ends with his assumption that the text had inevitably been altered to smooth over an initial textual incongruity, and it was conducted "possibly probably under the influence of a different doctrinal tradition describing the Eightfold Path"<sup>(6)</sup>. What I would like to present from now on is the result of my further research regarding a possible different doctrinal background of the last stage of transition of our text.

## II. Doctrinal Background of Textual Transition :

### Little Skepticism on Controversial Issue of Aśvaghōṣa's Sectarian Identity

While working on this topic, Johnston's note, again, attracted my attention. Among various references Johnston notes, it is the *Cūḷāvedalla-sutta* in *Majjhima Nikāya* (MN) that includes the description of classifying the constituents of the Eightfold Path into three classes<sup>(7)</sup>. Interestingly, it apparently shows the pattern identical to that of sequence and classification of the Central Asian fragments as illustrated on Table 3 below.

<i>śīla</i>	<i>samyag vākkarman</i>
	<i>samyak sahakāyakarman</i>
	<i>samyag ājīva-naya</i>
<i>samādhi</i>	<i>samyak smṛti</i>
	<i>samyak samādhi</i>
	<i>samyak parākrama</i>
<i>prajñā</i>	<i>samyag dṛṣṭi</i>
	<i>samyak vitarka</i>

Table 3 Three Class-Eightfold Path model in Central Asian fragments of the *Saundarananda*

I also checked the equivalent parts in *Cūḷāvedalla-sutta*'s Chinese equivalent, 法樂比丘尼經 (TD 1 788-792) as well as the Tibetan transmission of similar *Madhyamāgama sūtra*, quoted in Śamathadeva's commentary on *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* (AKBh) titled as *Abhidharmakośopāyikā*<sup>(8)</sup>. Although it is only extant in Tibetan translations, Śamathadeva's commentary is considered tremendously valuable sources as it introduces the entire texts of *āgama*, which have been partly quoted in AKBh. What is more interesting is that both sources present the Three Class-Eightfold Path model as follows (Table 4).

戒 (śīla)	正 語 / * <i>samyag vākkarman</i>
	正 業 / * <i>samyak sahakāyakarman</i>
	正 命 / * <i>samyag ājīva-naya</i>
定 (samādhi)	正 念 / * <i>samyak smṛti</i>

慧 (prajñā)	正 定 / * <i>samyak samādhi</i>
	正 見 / * <i>samyag dṛṣṭi</i>
	正 志 / * <i>samyag vitarka</i>
	正方便 / * <i>samyak parākrama</i>

Table 4 Three Class-Eightfold Path in 法樂比丘尼經 & *Abhidharmakoṣopāyikā*

Table 4 is very much alike with the case of Johnston's edition based on Nepali manuscripts in Table 1. The only difference is that the order of *prajñā-samādhi* in Table 1 is reversed as *samādhi-prajñā* in Table 4, and all the rest of the elements are identically classified. However, If you consider the transitional process which I have mentioned earlier, it is obvious that the latter scribe who attempts to make the intentional re-edition of this part was under the influence of the sources which were close to Chinese *Madhyamāgama* or the similar *āgama* tradition to which Śamathadeva related.

Needless to say, Chinese translations of *Madhyamāgama* are generally assumed to belong to (Mūla-) Sarvāstivādins, and Śamathadeva is also considered as (Mūla-) Sarvāstivādin. Furthermore, as Johnston's note also introduces, a single phrase on *prajñā-skandha* in *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* includes the same constituents of the Eightfold Path as Table 1 and 4, which includes the elements Right View, Right Reflection and Right efforts as follows.

*samyagdṛṣṭisaṅkalpavyāyāmāś ca prajñāskandha uktaḥ* (AKBh I, 159)

Therefore, the scribe, who worked on Nepali manuscript around 12th century or so, was highly likely under the influence of Sarvāstivādin's doctrinal tradition. In other words, as far as dealing with the description on the Eightfold Path, earlier version of the *Saundarananda* was influenced by non-Sarvāstivādin sources which were rather close to Theravāda tradition, while the later version of the text was under the influence of Sarvāstivādins.

The problem is that scholars who have disputed over Aśvaghoṣa's school affiliation generally agree on one point that he was Sarvāstivādin<sup>(9)</sup>. I am not, of course, simply denying the validity of the previous assertions on Aśvaghoṣa's sectarian identity all of a sudden biased on this tiny fragments describing the Eightfold Path. At the same time, I cannot simply agree with those previous assertions either, as far as regarding the possible non-Sarvāstivādin influence on this significant doctrinal statements in the original

and superior version of the *Saundarananda*. One should also acknowledge of the fact that all these arguments are merely based on our current standard edition with many corrupted passages. As Salomon relates, judging from this doctrinally significant editorial recension, one cannot deny the possibility that the complete earlier manuscript of the text would reveal much more cases of doctrinal variants than expected. Therefore, my preliminary conclusion is that it would be rather safe for us to remain vague about Aśvaghōṣa's Sectarian Identity until we get to have a chance to get to know more about the original text, if that is ever possible.

#### Notes

- (1) Besides the instances in the *Cūḷāvedalla-sutta* and Chinese and Tibetan *Madhyamāgama* discussed below, I have never encountered such a case in any other sources except the one found in *Peṭakopadesa*, in which Three Class elements are not directly mentioned [see Mizuno (1997) p. 119ff].
- (2) Johnston (1932) pp. 91-92.
- (3) Hartmann (1988) pp. 67-68 ; Salomon (1993) p. 238 n. 32.
- (4) Johnston (1928) vi-x ; Salomon (1993) p. 222.
- (5) Salomon (1993) pp. 231-233.
- (6) Salomon (1993) p. 238.
- (7) *yā c'āvuso visākha sammāvācā yo ca sammākammanto yo ca sammāājivo,*  
*ime dhammā silakkhandhe saṅgahitā;*  
*yo ca sammāvāyāmo yā ca sammāsati yo ca sammāsamādhī,*  
*ime dhammā samādhikkhandhe saṅgahitā;*  
*yā ca sammādiṭṭhi yo ca sammāsaṅkappo,*  
*ime dhammā paññākkhandhe saṅgahitāti* (MN I, 301)
- (8) Honjo (1983) p. 98-99 ; p. 106.
- (9) Yamabe (1996), Honjo(1987, 1992).

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